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**JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER**  
*for Youth and Their Communities*

## English Articulation Between the San Francisco Unified School District and the City College of San Francisco

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### Background

San Francisco's Bridge to Success (BtS) initiative brings together the City and County of San Francisco, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), the City College of San Francisco (CCSF), and key community organizations to promote postsecondary success for underrepresented students. Various working groups, each comprised of staff from both SFUSD and CCSF and focused on a different part of students' educational trajectories, can request cross-agency analyses from the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University to help make policy or programmatic changes to improve youth outcomes. At the request of BtS leadership and the English teaching team, the JGC used its Youth Data Archive to examine the relationship between students' high school English performance at SFUSD and their performance on CCSF's English placement test for incoming students. Previous research by CCSF and others has highlighted the importance of the initial placement test, as students who place below college-level courses are less likely to advance through the sequence of remedial courses needed to complete a two-year or four-year degree (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; City College of San Francisco, 2010).

Key findings from this analysis include:

- Approximately 90% of SFUSD graduates who attended CCSF placed below college-level English on CCSF's English placement exam.
- None of the high school academic measures used to predict students' college preparation—including GPA, California Standards Test (CST) proficiency levels (e.g., Proficient or Advanced), or Early Assessment Program (EAP) results—accurately predicted student placement into college-level English at CCSF. However, better performance on any of these high school measures was associated with higher scores on the placement test.
- Analysis of detailed student test data found strong alignment between the English Language Arts (ELA) CST and the CCSF English placement exams, but there is a mismatch between the cutoff scores the two tests assign to indicate English proficiency. The score generally needed to place college-level at CCSF is higher than the score required to place Advanced on the CST.

### Student Population

This analysis followed six cohorts of students who were enrolled as first-time SFUSD 9<sup>th</sup> graders in any school year from 2000-01 through 2005-06 and entered CCSF from 2004-05 through 2009-10. Students were included in the analysis if they graduated from SFUSD in four years, attended CCSF within three years after graduating, and

took CCSF’s English placement test, resulting in a total of 5,615 students. SFUSD students who attended CCSF were slightly more likely to be male (54%) than female (46%). Chinese students comprised the single largest ethnic group (39% of all SFUSD students who attended CCSF), followed by Latino (20%), Filipino (10%), African-American (9%), and White (7%) students, with the remaining 15% of students falling into a variety of other ethnicity categories. Approximately 16% of the SFUSD cohort were classified as English learners in their last year at SFUSD, with 22% of Chinese and Latino students classified as English learners compared to 8% for the rest of the population.

### **CCSF English Placement Test**

CCSF’s English department uses an internally developed placement test that assigns students to a set of placement categories ranging from college-level English to eight levels below college-level English.<sup>1</sup> Exhibit 1 (page 3) includes a full description of the placement categories and the required English course associated with each placement test result. Each placement level corresponds to a one-semester course offered at CCSF, meaning that a student who placed ‘two levels below college-level English’ would be required to take and pass two one-semester courses, or one full year of English, before being eligible to take college-level English.

**Exhibit 1. CCSF English Placement Test Results and Corresponding Course Descriptions**

<b>Placement Category</b>	<b>English Placement Result</b>	<b>ESL Placement Result</b>	<b>CCSF Course Catalog Description for Corresponding English Courses</b>
College	1B		<b>ENGL 1B. Reading, Writing, &amp; Critical Thinking About Literature:</b> University-parallel reading, writing, and critical thinking applied to literature, including poetry, drama, short fiction, and the novel. Students will write 8-10,000 words of expository and argumentative essays and other writing, employing methods of literary analysis and skills of critical thinking.
College	1A		<b>ENGL 1A. University-Parallel Reading and Composition:</b> University-parallel reading, writing, and critical thinking with a major research component. Reading, writing, and research assignments are based predominately on non-fiction texts.
1 Level Below	96		<b>ENGL 96. Academic Writing and Reading:</b> College-level training and practice in critical reading and in writing argumentative essays. Emphasis is on reading and writing analytically and developing research and documentation skills.
2 Levels Below	93		<b>ENGL 93. Introduction to Academic Writing and Reading:</b> Training and practice in academic essay writing and analytical reading. Emphasis is on learning to read and write pre-collegiate argumentative prose.
3 Levels Below	92	ESL 160	<b>ENGL 92. Basic Composition and Reading II:</b> Continued instruction and practice in writing and reading. Emphasis on reading expository prose and literature as a basis for writing.

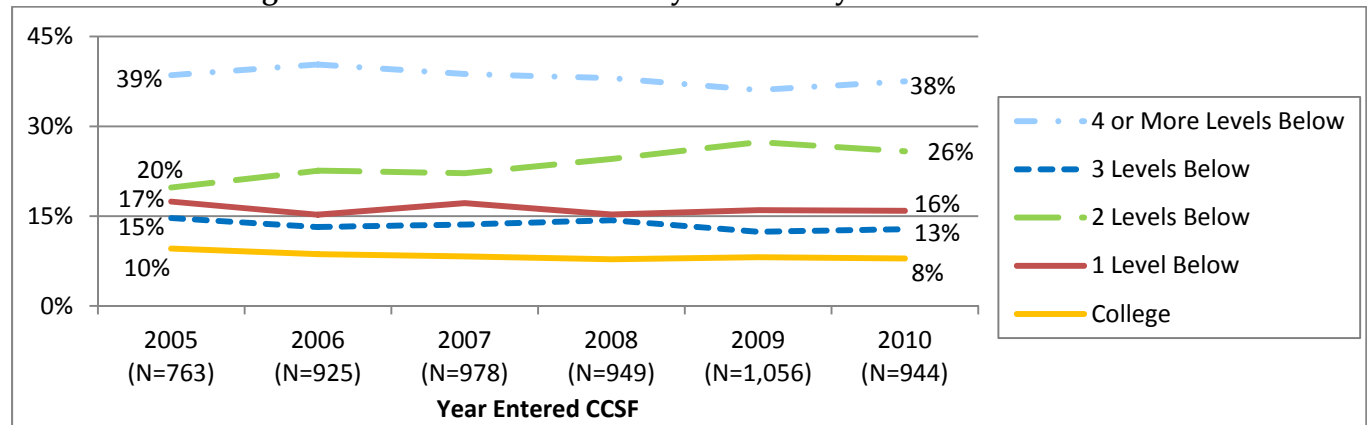
<sup>1</sup> Students may waive the placement test requirement by meeting certain standards, such as passing an AP English exam.

**Exhibit 1. CCSF English Placement Test Results and Corresponding Course Descriptions**

Placement Category	English Placement Result	ESL Placement Result	CCSF Course Catalog Description for Corresponding English Courses
4 Levels Below	91	ESL 150	<b>ENGL 91. Introduction to Basic Reading and Writing:</b> This course presents a basic grounding and practice in writing, reading, and study skills. The emphasis is on learning reading and writing processes and reading short selections which form the basis of the writing assignments.
4 Levels Below	90	ESL 150	<b>ENGL 90. Introduction to Basic Writing:</b> This course presents basic grounding and practice in writing, with some attention to reading and study skills. It emphasizes writing processes and writing short papers. In addition students read short selections forming the basis of the writing assignments.
5 Levels Below	L	ESL 140	<b>ENGL L. Individualized Instruction in Basic Reading Skills:</b> Designed for students who need to develop reading skills, improve basic reading comprehension, increase vocabulary, and improve understanding of idiomatic English and figurative language.
6 Levels Below	K	ESL 130	<b>ENGL K. Pronunciation, Spelling, and Reading Skills:</b> Concentration on the rules of English phonics and word attack skills and development of adequate comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary.

Exhibit 2 shows that just 8% of SFUSD’s four-year graduates placed into college-level English in 2009-10, and this value has not significantly changed over the last six years. Approximately 38% of entering graduates in 2009-10 placed at four or more levels below college-level English and required two or more years of English courses (i.e. four semesters) before reaching a transfer-level English course.<sup>2</sup> These results varied significantly by student ethnicity; among non-English learners, 23% of White students placed into college-level English at CCSF, compared to 13% of Chinese students and 4% of African-American, Filipino, and Latino students.

**Exhibit 2. CCSF English Placement Test Results by CCSF Entry Year**



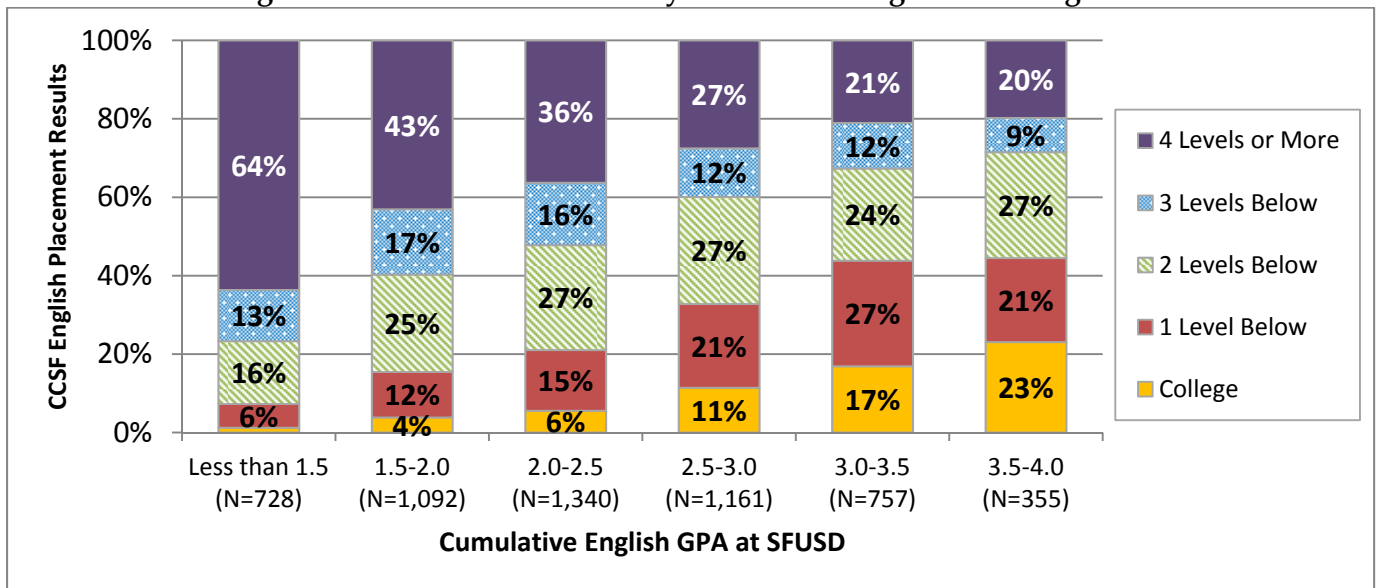
Notes: Incoming students can take either the CCSF English or ESL placement test. Students taking the ESL placement test can score as high as three levels below college-level English, as ESL 160 acts as an equivalent to English 92.

<sup>2</sup> The Exhibit combines all SFUSD students who placed four or more levels below college-level English into one category, though very few SFUSD graduates placed six or more courses below college-level.

## The Relationship Between SFUSD English GPA and CCSF English Placement

SFUSD students generally follow a sequence of English courses from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade that includes World Literature, Ethnic Experience and Literature, American Literature, and English/European literature, with some variation among high schools in course offerings. English learner students may also be enrolled in ESL/ELD Reading and Language Development courses. This course schedule does not include various reading support programs that students may also be accessing. Exhibit 3 shows that higher high school GPA was associated with higher scores on CCSF’s English placement test in general, but that GPA was not a strong predictor of college-level placement. Approximately 22% of students who earned a high school English GPA of 3.0 or higher placed directly into college-level English at CCSF.

**Exhibit 3. CCSF English Placement Test Results by Cumulative High School English GPA**

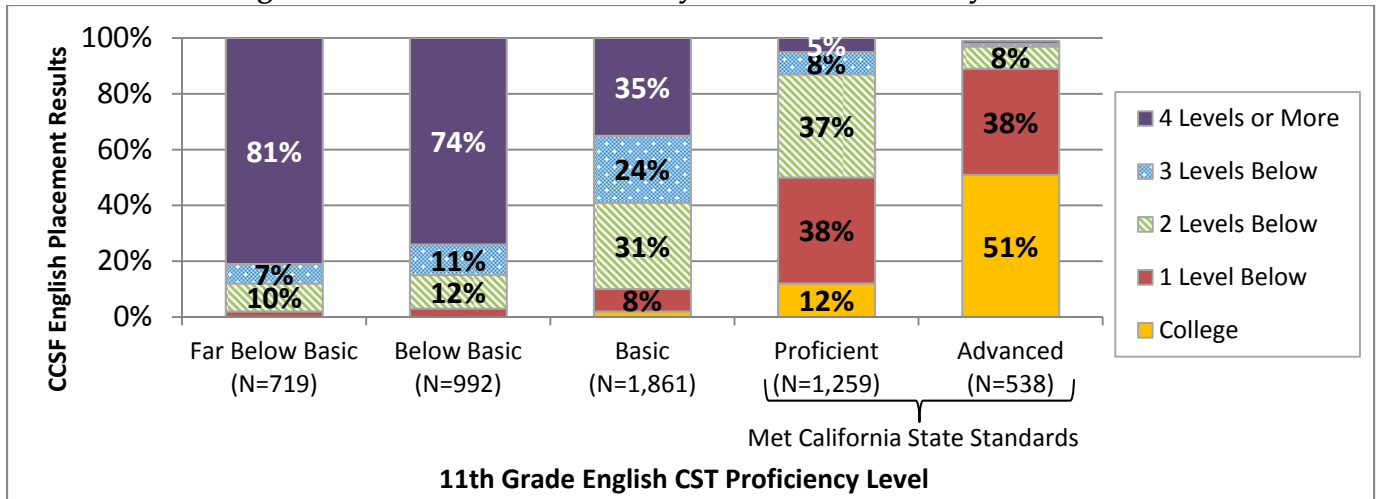


Note: GPA includes all core English courses and ESL/ELD Reading and Language Development Courses described above. GPA is unadjusted for AP or other courses.

## The Relationship Between CST Proficiency Levels and CCSF English Placement

All high school students take their final CST ELA exam in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and are assigned a proficiency level from 1 (Far Below Basic) through 5 (Advanced). California’s goal is for all students to score at the Proficient (4) or Advanced (5) level in each content area of the CST, which represents meeting grade level content standards. Exhibit 4 shows that strong performance on the CST predicted higher placement levels at CCSF, but many students who placed at the Proficient or Advanced level did not place directly into college-level English. Approximately half (51%) of students who tested as Advanced on the CST were able to place into college-level English at CCSF, compared to just 12% of Proficient students and virtually no students at Basic or below. Most students who scored at Basic or below on the CST required at least one year (i.e. two semesters) of English coursework at CCSF before they could reach college-level English. CST results do not account for courses taken in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

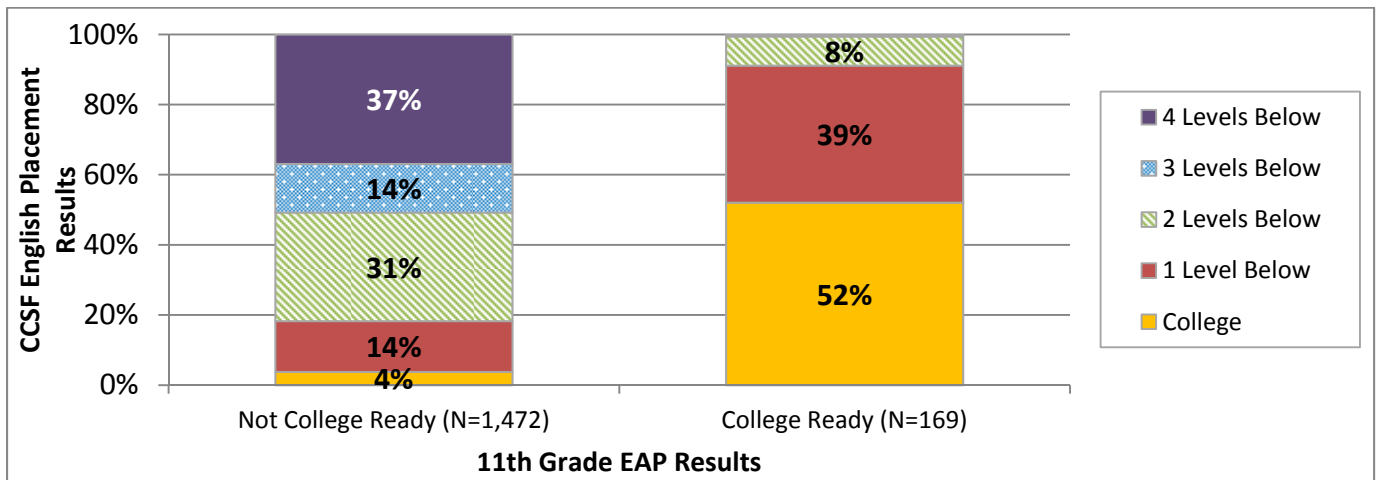
Exhibit 4. CCSF English Placement Tests Results by CST ELA Proficiency Level in 11<sup>th</sup> Grade



**The Relationship Between EAP Performance and CCSF English Placement**

Students who take the CST ELA test in 11<sup>th</sup> grade may also take the Early Assessment Program (EAP) test. The EAP, developed by the California State University (CSU) system to help high school students measure their college-readiness in advance of college math and English placement tests, was first utilized by SFUSD in the 2006-07 school year. Before taking the CST, student complete a 45-minute essay section and later answer 15 multiple choice questions appended to the CST. The results from the additional questions and essay are combined with the CST results to create an aggregate score that informs students if they are “college-ready” or “not college-ready.” EAP results show a similar relationship to college-readiness at CCSF as the CST ELA exam. About half the students identified by the EAP as college-ready placed into college-level English at CCSF and 8% of EAP college-ready students were one year (i.e. two semesters) or more below college-level work (Exhibit 5). Similar to the CST, EAP results are from 11<sup>th</sup> grade and CCSF placement test results may be influenced by continued student development through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Exhibit 5. CCSF English Placement Tests Results by EAP Results in 11<sup>th</sup> Grade, SFUSD Students who Entered CCSF in 2008-09 and 2009-10



Notes: In the most recent 2010-11 school year, 98% of SFUSD students took the EAP English exam and 30% scored as college ready. The majority of SFUSD students who score college ready on the EAP attend four-year postsecondary institutions.

## **A Deeper Examination of the Relationship Between the CST ELA exam and the CCSF English Placement Test**

As discussed, this analysis showed that higher performance on the CST resulted in better CCSF placement test results, but even students scoring at the highest proficiency levels (e.g. Proficient or Advanced) did not consistently place into college-level English. This finding contrasts with previous analysis that found that CST proficiency levels and EAP results in math were strong predictors of performance on the CCSF math placement test (Gurantz, 2011). To better understand why Proficient and Advanced CST students did not consistently place into college-level English, we examined students' raw scores on these two exams. Exhibit 6 is a scatterplot of students' raw scores on these two exams, with values ranging from 11 to 73 questions correct on the CST ELA in 11<sup>th</sup> grade (out of 75 questions total) and values ranging from 18 to 107 questions correct on the CCSF English placement exam (out of 110 questions total).

Results indicated that:

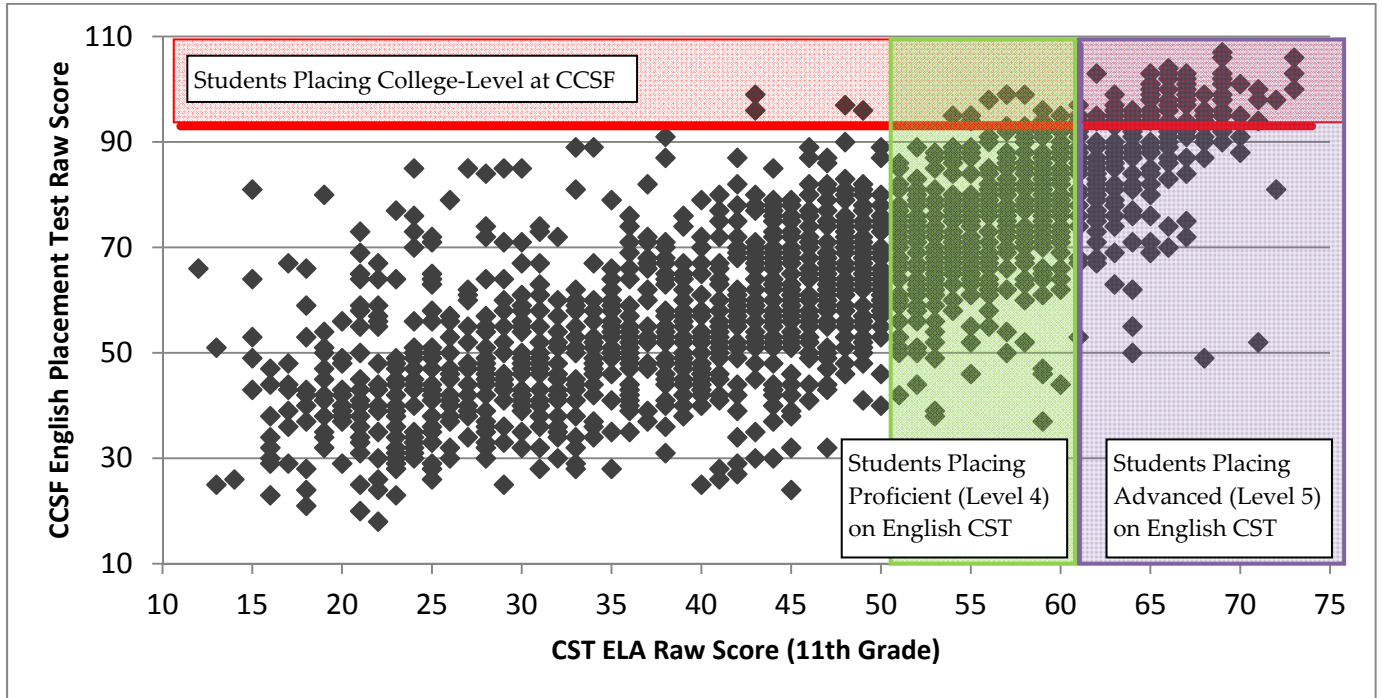
- The two exams are highly aligned, as students who scored well on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade CST ELA exam also scored well on the CCSF English placement test. As seen in Exhibit 6, there is a high degree of correlation between the two exams when we focus directly on the number of questions answered correctly ( $\alpha=0.76$ )<sup>3</sup>, indicating that strong performance on the CST ELA exam is a strong predictor of performance on the CCSF English placement test once we look beyond simple proficiency levels.<sup>4</sup>
- CST proficiency levels do not predict college-level placement due to a mismatch in the overall cutoff scores selected at the upper range of the two exams. To place in college-level English at CCSF a student must score 93 or higher on the placement exam (the red box in Exhibit 6), but students scoring at the Advanced proficiency level (purple box) generally do not meet this criterion until they begin to score in the far upper ranges of the CST exam. Students scoring Proficient on the CST (green box), who met 11<sup>th</sup> grade English state standards, are rarely able to score the required 93 correct on the CCSF English placement exam in order to place into college-level English.

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<sup>3</sup> A correlation coefficient, designated by  $\alpha$ , measures the relative alignment between two different scales. A score of one indicates perfect alignment, zero indicates no alignment, and negative one indicates perfectly opposite alignment.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, we compared each of the five CST subtests to performance on the CCSF placement test and the correlation coefficients all fell in a relatively small range between 0.59 and 0.68; if there was misalignment in materials covered between the two tests then we might expect that some subtests would have a higher correlation than others. The five CST ELA subtests are: Word Analysis (8 questions), Reading Comprehension (19), Literary Response and Analysis (17), Writing Strategies (22), and Written Conventions (9).

Exhibit 6. Scatterplot Comparing Raw Scores on the 11<sup>th</sup> Grade CST ELA exam and the CCSF English Placement Exam



Notes: Scoring 93 or above on the CCSF placement test placed students into college-level English and scoring between 78 and 92 placed students one-level below college-level English. To earn a proficiency level of Advanced on the CST ELA exam students needed to score 61 or above; scoring from 51 to 60 earned students a proficiency level of Proficient. Results are for 1,846 SFUSD students who took the CST in 2006-07 or 2007-08 and enrolled in CCSF in 2008-09 or 2009-10, respectively.

**Conclusion**

This analysis found that common measures of students’ academic preparation in high school, such as GPA, CST proficiency levels (e.g. Proficient or Advanced), and EAP results, did not accurately predict placement into college-level English at CCSF. A key issue is that misalignment between CCSF’s English placement exam and the CST, which tests high school state standards, can leave high school students unclear as to whether they are on-track for college-level coursework. The few students who placed into college-level English at CCSF are those who scored in the upper range of the Advanced proficiency level on the CST ELA exam in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

These results raise the question of the appropriateness of the cutoff levels on the CST ELA exam and the CCSF English placement test. Solutions to this problem are not clear cut, and state and local policymakers must work together to identify what standards determine whether a student is prepared for college-level English, whether at CCSF or any postsecondary institution. One possible solution would be to lower the cutoff score on the CCSF English placement exam to more closely reflect what students are being asked to master in high school; the cohort operating with that lower cutoff score could be tracked to determine if they are succeeding after direct placement into college level English. We recognize that the concept of “lowering standards” is never popular. Nonetheless, this analysis found that scoring at the highest level on tests of student learning and college-readiness adopted by the California Department of Education and the California State University system does not meet the threshold required by CCSF’s English department.

The issue of remediation affects two- and four-year colleges across the country, and no one policy solution is a panacea (Grubb et al., 2011). CCSF is piloting an accelerated approach to the current English curriculum sequence in order to shorten the time needed for students to reach college-level coursework. In addition, CCSF's English department is engaging in a pilot that will allow students who were designated as "college ready" on the EAP to place directly into college-level English, and will monitor these students to gauge how well they perform in their English courses. Even if placement cutoffs are adjusted and sequences altered, approximately half of SFUSD graduates score below Proficient on their final CST exam, and may have inadequate English proficiency to be considered college- or career-ready. Working together, SFUSD and CCSF are making changes to ensure that all students are given appropriately demanding coursework that prepares them for their future, while removing institutional barriers that might unintentionally hinder student progress towards the completion of their postsecondary schooling.

## References

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